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## **Regional EPA officials plan public meeting to reaffirm safety of West Lake landfill**

In Backroom Column

By Jo Mannies, Beacon political reporter

[https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/31152/westlake\\_bridgeton\\_landfill\\_052913](https://www.stlbeacon.org/#!/content/31152/westlake_bridgeton_landfill_052913)

Regional officials with the federal Environmental Protection Agency are holding a public meeting June 25 to allay fears of Bridgeton area residents about possible health risks posed by the radioactive waste stored at the West Lake Landfill.

The meeting is be held at Pattonville High School, from 6:30-8:30 p.m.

The EPAs message, delivered Wednesday via a report and conference call, is that the waste – leftover from the 1970s – is safely contained and poses no risk.

Public attention has been heightened about the safety of the radioactive material because it's part of larger landfill complex, now no longer active, that also includes the controversial Bridgeton Landfill, which is emitting strong odors and has an underground section that's smoldering.

"The aerial survey has shown that the radiological contaminated waste remain contained within secure fenced areas...and do not pose health risks to the public," said regional EPA administrator Karl Brooks in a conference call Wednesday with reporters.

He said the results were consistent with previous radiological surveys conducted in the 1990s of the area, which has been a federally designated Superfund site, because of the contamination, for over 20 years.

“The site is securely fenced and clearly marked with warning signs. Under these conditions, this material poses no health risks to the public,” Brooks said. “A person would have to illegally trespass onto the site to be exposed to elevated levels of radiation.”

Brooks said the EPA is continuing to monitor and analyze the ground water in the area.

The EPA’s survey was conducted in March under the EPA’s Airborne Spectral Photometric Environmental Collection Technology (ASPECT) Program, in which “a pilot, co-pilot, technician and scientific equipment on board flew multiple low-altitude passes over the site and adjacent residential and industrial properties to identify surface areas that emit gamma radiation,” the agency said in a statement.

The Missouri Department of Natural Resources conducted a similar survey of West Lake less than two weeks ago, on May 16, and has reported some of the same conclusions – that the radioactive waste is safely secure and not emitting unhealthy levels of radiation.

The Missouri Coalition for the Environment has challenged the federal and state assurances, contending in a recent statement that “the data show clearly that the subsurface landfill fire has moved beyond the equipment that was meant to stop its advance toward tons of radioactive wastes leftover from the purification of uranium for nuclear weapons.”

Ed Smith, the coalition’s safety director, contended that recent statements by the EPA and Missouri Attorney General Chris Koster back up the group’s assertion. The coalition has long sought to have the radioactive waste removed.

Work continues to end odor problem at Bridgeton Landfill

The state of Missouri filed suit earlier this year against Republic Services Inc., the parent company of a subsidiary that owns the Bridgeton Landfill portion. Republic currently is in the midst of a remediation program to eliminate the odors, although the construction has temporarily made the smell worse.

Republic is paying temporary housing expenses for some residents forced to move by the smell, but hopes to have its work completed by the end of this summer. The process includes removing concrete piers that may be exacerbating the problem, and helping fuel the high underground temperatures recorded in a portion of the site. Republic ultimately plans to install a plastic cover over the entire landfill.

Republic has been filing regular reports on its progress with the state Department of Natural Resources, which has in turn posted the reports on its web site.

What has frustrated some residents, and reporters, is that state and federal officials haven’t said exactly how far the radioactive waste is from the hot underground portion of the Bridgeton Landfill, which Koster and the Coalition for the Environment have characterized as an underground fire. (Republic disagrees with that characterization.)

The latest gauges of the hot underground portion have recorded temperatures of up to 170 degrees Fahrenheit.

Koster, who has publicly displayed a map showing the locations of the underground fire and the radioactive section, generally has agreed with federal and state officials that the radioactive waste is too far away to be threatened by the hot underground section.

But the Coalition for the Environment is citing different distance estimates made by the EPA and Koster.

“The EPA stated at its January meeting on West Lake that the landfill fire was 1,200 feet from the radioactive wastes,” Smith with the coalition said. Koster, meanwhile, has most recently estimated the distance at 1,000 feet.

The coalition cites the different estimates as proof that the fire is moving closer to the radioactive waste. State and federal officials deny that's the case.